The Army's FLOATIN

Story and Photos by Steve Harding

At 950 feet APSRON 4's *Watson*-class LMSRs *(main photo)* are the second-largest ships in the Navy's inventory. Yet despite their size, the squadron's vessels fit easily within Diego Garcia's huge lagoon *(inset photo)*.

NG BRIGADE

Diego Garcia's well-protected lagoon — some 13 miles long and 6.5 miles wide — is an ideal anchorage for APSRON 4.

U.S. Navy photo

Because the LMSRs' crews live aboard the anchored-out vessels, mail and other items are delivered by small craft and winched aboard.

RIDING calmly at anchor in the wide lagoon, the huge Navy cargo ships don't look at all menacing. But packed within them are enough armored vehicles and other equipment to equip an entire Army heavy brigade.

The vessels — collectively known as Afloat Prepositioning Ships Squadron 4, or APSRON 4 — are based at the Indian Ocean island of Diego Garcia *[see page 30]*. Among the newest and most advanced ships in the nation's inventory, they are the key component in a vast force-projection partnership among the Army, Navy, civilian contractors and merchant mariners.

The goal of that partnership is to be able to put two armored battalions and two mechanized battalions — plus support elements — ashore anywhere in the world within 15 days of notification to do so.

It's a tall order, but one that APSRON 4 was specifically created to handle.

Combat Power on Call

The establishment of APSRON 4 and its basing at Diego Garcia resulted from a post-Gulf War strategic mobility study that examined in detail the problems which arose during the deployment stage of that conflict, said Navy Capt. Edward C. Zurey, the squadron's commander.

"The study determined the types of equipment the Army would need to have forward-deployed. While some of this equipment could be stored on land, the study noted that the continuing closure of U.S. bases overseas would have a detrimental effect on the Army's ability to preposition the necessary materiel ashore," he said.

Positioning the equipment aboard fast ships at a forward location was the logical solution, Zurey said, because it eliminates reliance on relatively slow sealift deliveries from the continental United States to overseas theaters, while also avoiding the high cost of the large airlift required to quickly deliver vital equipment. And it was an already-proven concept, he added, because the Marine Corps had been prepositioning vehicles and equipment aboard ships for several years.

The study ultimately resulted in the creation of Army Prepositioned Set 3, or APS-3, the afloat component of the larger Army Prepositioned Stocks program.

APS-3 encompasses a staggering range of materiel, including combat and tactical wheeled vehicles; trucks and Humvees; Army watercraft; port-opening and cargo-handling equipment; artillery; ammunition; quartermaster and mortuary-affairs assets; and thousands of cargo containers packed with tools, spare parts, and medical and food supplies.

All of this materiel is currently stowed aboard the 15 ships of the Combat Prepositioning Force, a component of the Navy's Military

Each of APSRON 4's ships is packed with materiel, including hundreds of vehicles chained down within a series of cargo holds.

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Sealift Command. While the watercraft and most of the sustainment materiel are carried aboard leased civilian ships based on Guam, in the western Pacific, it is the Diego Garcia-based ships of APSRON 4 that carry APS-3's combat power, Zurey said.

The Right Ship for the Job

APSRON 4 is built around a class of advanced cargo ships known as Large, Medium Speed, Roll-on/roll-off, or LMSR, vessels. Seven are currently on hand, with an eighth to be delivered this fall, and all are named after Army Medal of Honor recipients.

At 950 feet the *Watson*-class LMSRs are only about 90 feet shorter than a *Nimitz*-class aircraft carrier and, except for that type of vessel, are the largest ships in the Navy's inventory. Each LMSR can carry some 1,100 pieces of rolling stock, including Abrams tanks, Bradley fighting vehicles, Paladin self-propelled howitzers, Humvees, trucks and trailers, all of which are chained down in a series of cavernous holds. The vehicles are loaded and unloaded via large stern and side ramps, while two large deck-mounted cargo cranes are used to dispatch other materiel.

"These are the most advanced ships in the Military Sealift Command," said Capt. George W. Hynes, the civilian master of the USNS *Watson*, which was the first of the LMSRs built and is now APSRON 4's flagship. "They're fast and very maneuverable, despite their size and huge cargo capacity."

Just as important, Hynes said, is the fact that the LMSRs are highly automated.

"Each ship has state-of-the-art electronics for navigation, engine operation, communications, and fire detection and suppression," he said. "That means that each ship, despite its size, can operate with a crew of just 28 people."

Mariners and Sailors

The civilian mariners on each of the Diego Garcia-based LMSRs work for the Maersk Line Ltd., the Virginia-based contractor tasked with operating the ships.

The mariners work a four-months-on, four-months-off schedule. When they're on, they work set watches, seven days a week, and handle everything from navigation to engine-room operations to food service.

While the mariners operate the LMSRs, Zurey and his 12 military and civilian APSRON 4 staff members ensure that the ships are always ready to deploy.

"The Navy personnel handle all the many details involved in planning for, and executing, APSRON 4's mission," said Lt. Carmelo W. Nicastro Jr., the squadron's operations officer.

"While that encompasses all the day-to-day details common to any military organization — coordination with other commands, logistical planning, personnel actions and force protection, for example — our main job is to ensure that the ships are ready to sail when called on," he said.

"Our charter is to be ready to get underway and go anywhere within 24 hours, and we're expected to be able to get there at maximum speed," Zurey said. "We test our ability to do that in a number of ways, including getting the ships underway once a month for about four days at a time. That allows us to conduct engineering trials, at-sea training and so on.

"The bottom line for APSRON 4 is to deliver the embarked equipment where it needs to go, when it needs to be there," Zurey said. "The troops then just have to meet us at the off-load location and 'marry up' with the equipment. They don't have to bring much with them beyond their personal gear, since we carry virtually all the equipment they'll need."

Maintainers and Soldiers

While it's up to APSRON 4's sailors and civilian mariners to get the LMSRs' vital cargoes to the appointed place quickly and efficiently, ensuring that the equipment is ready to roll when it gets ashore is up to contract maintenance teams and soldiers.

Each LMSR has an assigned contractor team of seven mechanics and a supply specialist, all of whom are on renewable one-year contracts with Texas-based DynCorp.

"We ensure that the equipment runs properly and is safe when it is turned over to the Army," said Gary Ridley, *Watson's* lead DynCorp mechanic. "We inspect the vehicles frequently, and every one gets started up about every six months. We maintain the equipment and do any repairs that are required."

The job can be challenging, Ridley said, given that the vehicles are packed very closely together within each ship's seven vast parking decks.

"The way some of the vehicles are stowed, it's difficult to visually inspect certain areas," he said. "And though we do a lot of minor fixes, we simply can't do the major repairs that are done

Though large vessels by any standards, APSRON 4's LMSRs are highly automated and can thus be operated by relatively small crews.

in a motorpool ashore. But we know how important this mission is, and we do whatever it takes to make sure this equipment is ready when it's needed."

Validating the equipment's readiness is the prime mission for the soldiers of the Combat Equipment Detachment, Diego Garcia, who perform Care of Supplies in Storage, or COSIS, functions for the cargo.

"We go aboard the ships frequently to inspect the vehicles, and provide whatever technical and logistical assistance the contract maintainers might need," said SFC Larry Fick, contracting officer representative for the LMSRs and one of four soldiers on the COSIS team.

The Army requires the embarked equipment to be at the highest possible state of readiness, Fick said.

"Contractors can't always fix everything aboard ship, but as long as they have the necessary parts on hand and ready to go when they download the ship, they can fix most problems very quickly," he said. "The cargo should be close to 100 percent mission-capable within about a week of the ship's arrival in port."

Overseeing the care and maintenance of the varied equipment embarked on the LMSRs is a job the COSIS soldiers obviously take very seriously.

> *"The whole idea is that this equipment has to be ready for war soon after it rolls off the ship, and we help guarantee that."*

"We think we have one of the most important jobs in the Army," Fick said. "We're taking care of more than 8,000 pieces of rolling stock valued at more than $6 billion. The whole idea is that this equipment has to be ready for war soon after it rolls off the ship, and we help guarantee that."

A Team Effort

Though the ships of APSRON 4 are painted Navy gray, the squadron's mission is to project Army combat power quickly and efficiently over vast distances. The organization's success in that role, its members say, is the result of close coordination.

"This has been a team effort from the beginning," Nicastro said. "The cooperation among the Army, the Navy, the mariners and the contractors is fantastic. We've been able to quickly find common ground, and we've been able to fill gaps in each other's knowledge or experience."

And that same close relationship also exists with the other members of the team outside Diego Garcia, Zurey added.

"We also work very closely with the Army's Central Command and Military Traffic Management Cmd., and with the Bahrain-based 831st Transportation Battalion," Zurey said. "And, of course, we work arm-in-arm with the U.S. Army Materiel Command's Combat Equipment Group-Afloat, at Goose Creek, S.C.; they're the people who are ultimately responsible for taking care of the cargo we carry."

The success of the team approach to APSRON 4's mission has been validated in the real world, Zurey said, most recently when the squadron's USNS *Watkins* deployed from Diego Garcia to Kuwait. There it offloaded its cargo of vehicles and equipment to support Exercise Vigilant Hammer, after which the ship took aboard other vehicles for return to the United States.

"All the people who have a stake in APSRON 4's mission — Army, Navy, merchant mariners and contractors — are focused on one goal: ensuring that the Army combat power embarked on these ships is ready when and where it's needed," Zurey said. "That's the whole reason we're here." □

Capt. George W. Hynes studies a navigation aid as he takes the *Watson* out of the lagoon and into the open sea.